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To Jo Anne Jenkins, a fine woman and a great mother, *in memoriam*

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7. INTERNAL ENMITY: HOLLYWOOD'S FRAGILE HOME STORIES IN THE 1950s AND 1960s

Elisabeth Bronfen

As Michael Wood notes in his discussion of the myths Hollywood came up with in the 1940s and 1950s so as to negotiate actual dilemmas, "America is not so much a home for anyone as a universal dream of home, a wish whose attraction depends upon its remaining at the level of a wish."[1] Applying this notion of home as a vaunted ideal to the anxieties engendered by the Cold War on the home front, it is further worth noting that any solution Hollywood films come up with to contain these fears can be only imaginary because, as Wood adds, if there were a real solution then there would be no need for mythic narratives. When, in turn, genre films at the time, and particularly the melodrama, make dramaturgic use of concrete homes to represent the idea of protection and comfort, these houses refer to a personal sense of belonging even as they also stand in for the nation as the geopolitical community whose safety one must be willing to protect at all costs. Under Senator Joe McCarthy's witch-hunt against alleged Communist spies and sympathizers in the United States government and elsewhere, the Cold War not only turned into a domestic issue, rendering clear the fragility of any American dream of home. Rather, the logic of antagonism on which this international conflict was predicated also transformed into a struggle within. The simple opposition between "we" and 'them' transformed into the far more differentiated opposition of "we v. us," in the context of which the home emerged as a contested site. In what Richard Hofstadter called "a paranoid style in American politics," an anxious hyper-vigilance fostering the collective fantasy that subversive elements where living everywhere, undetected, ready to contaminate or attack their unsuspecting

fellow men, underscored not only a crisis of national security but also of the home as its most effective cultural trope.[2]

As point of departure for my discussion of the way Hollywood came to shape this imaginary threat to the nation as a subversion of the family by enemies within, I have chosen Joseph Weisberg's *The Americans*. The retrospective look at Cold War culture, which this television series offers, conceives of the house which the Soviet undercover agents, Philip and Elizabeth Jennings, inhabit in Falls Church explicitly as the stage for a struggle that renders both this home and the American homeland "uncanny." Sigmund Freud coined the term so as to analyze the distress called forth when the ordinary suddenly becomes strange, unsettling any sense of psychic certitude.[3] His formulation of a disturbance of the ordinary can, however, also be fruitfully applied to a discussion of the malaise on which Cold War culture thrives, given that the German word *heimlich* refers both to something familiar and something secret; to a clandestine core at the heart of the ordinary. In the case of the Jennings, one might surmise: while this couple represents a clandestine foreign body in an allegedly safe neighborhood, the fact that FBI agent Stan Beeman, working in counterintelligence, moves into a house across the street from them signals that what on the surface looks like a secure neighborhood is nothing other than a cover-up. In other words, in *The Americans*, the familiar is quite explicitly rendered strange because something repressed is shown to have resurfaced, namely the political Other that was meant to be safely lodged on the other side of the Iron Curtain. At the same time, in that we know the Jennings to be spies, while no one else seems to be able to tell, the television show also offers a particular spin on the Cold War culture of paranoia. The Jennings are adroit not only at a perfect mimicry of the ordinary, middle-class family. In that the disguises they put on during their missions offer an equally convincing performance of what a wide array of urbanites, living in Washington, D.C. in the early 1980s, look like, their deft masquerading of Americans renders visible the intangibility of an internal enemy that has appropriated to perfection the appearance of its adversary.

Their home base is equally duplicitous. On the surface, their house looks exactly like all the other homes in their neighborhood while, in fact, it is here that their espionage is planned and carried out. Next to the washing machine in the cellar is a secret closet, sheltering their costumes, their weapons, as well as the technical equipment they use to contact their handler. While Elizabeth and Philip's bedroom is the obvious site for clandestine conversations, whenever the telephone rings and they are given a new assignment, their double life even pervades the kitchen, normally thought of as the hearth of the home. Above all, the mother, who in post-World War II Hollywood was meant to assert the myth of an intact domesticity, is the more aggressively patriotic of the two secret agents. And yet, while Elizabeth conspires to undermine her children's

allegiance to the United States, Philip entertains fantasies of defection. As such, he renders the distinction between enemy and friend even more complicated in that he has, himself, become infected with America as the dream of home. Furthermore, with the Beemans living across the street from the Jennings, their home transforms into a domestic battle zone in yet another sense. Befitting a culture in which everything is under suspicion, what appear to be neighborly exchanges between the two families could be a cover for mutual surveillance. Indeed, at the end of the first season, Stan, who has noticed that Philip's car is the same make as the one in which a Soviet double agent was abducted, actually breaks into their garage one night. Though he finds nothing because Elizabeth has already removed all traces of their hostage, the friendship between him and this couple, sustained throughout the next three seasons, is predicated on uncertainty: has he guessed who his neighbors are and is waiting for them to make a mistake? Does he deny what he wishes not to acknowledge because he has grown fond of them? Or is he successfully duped by the Jennings because their con game is such a perfect facade of an American home?

By looking back at the last years of the Cold War through the lens of the political consequences we know them to have had, what *The Americans* draws our attention to is that even, if the home, in the name of which one fights, is a political myth that must remain at the level of fantasy, the illusion of security it promises is itself predicated on the invocation of an internal threat that *can never* but also *must never* be fully contained. If there were no sign of threat, then the vast effort of containment would not be necessary. As such, owing to the cult of domesticity propagated by Cold War culture, the domestic space turned into a contested site where the inability to stabilize the distinction between the other and the same, on which this logic of containment was predicated, was repeatedly addressed *and* repeatedly propagated.[4] As this chapter will argue, during the 1950s and '60s, the Hollywood melodrama emerged as one of the key genres in which America was able to explain its anxieties and dreams to itself. It did so by lodging the concerns of Cold War containment in home stories, revolving around an uncanny instability at the heart of the of family, that is, the very ideal meant to guarantee national security and international peace. Formations of internal strangeness inside private homes came *to reflect* and *reflect on* the permeability of national borders as well. At the same time, many of these melodramas refigure cultural preoccupations into shapes even while they don't necessarily tame them. Rather, they contain them in the double sense of the word: controlling and restraining anxieties even while comprising and accommodating them. When, in revisiting these melodramas, we privilege the fissures in the mythic solutions they offer, rather than the ideology they seemingly purport, what we notice is a double voicing inherent to the mutual implication of private home and nation. Family narratives revolving around an enmity within think about domestic security in terms of personal

crisis threatening the quotidian life of the characters even while the resolution discovered by each text also serves as a trope for the possibility of a political solution.

Bringing the War Home

Leo McCarey's anti-communist film, *My Son John* (1952) quite explicitly brings the Cold War home in the figure of a young, left-wing intellectual who has infiltrated the government.[5] John Jefferson embodies the alien within, however, not only because, by assisting a Soviet courier, he threatens national security. Upon his return home, the acerbic irony he deploys to signal his detachment from the values of his middle-American parents, is also read by them as a form of mental alienation. While John openly opposes the father, who immediately suspects him of being "a Commie," a deeper intimacy connects him to his mother Lucille. She, in turn, is the one who, owing to his strange behavior, actually spies on him, who listens in on his conversations with others, who interrogates him hoping to elicit a confession and even threatens to expose him to the F.B.I. At the same time, driven by nostalgia, she repeatedly reminds John, who now appears to her as an uncanny double of himself, of the happy boy with whom she used to play. If, as the film's title suggests, in her ability to control her son, the mother is the key player, she also emerges, however, as a deeply ambivalent figure. In the course of the film it becomes increasingly difficult to decide whether John's alienness is only a symptom of the political climate or also a reflection on the home that shaped him.

Indeed, in that the film offers a psychological explanation for the appeals of Communism, conceiving John's political leanings as his Oedipal struggle with his parents, the very home meant to provide the solution emerges as the source of the problem. As Michael Rogin puts it, the film "located the threat to the free man less in the alien Communist state than in his loving mother."[6] Excessive maternal care, the fulcrum of the cult of domesticity, emerges as a mirror inversion of the perfidious influence and surveillance of the Communist Other. The threat the home poses absorbs the political threat. Once the son has rendered visible the internal instability of the home, the figure presiding over it is also made responsible for his alienation from the very political and religious values she espouses. If the mother emerges as the unwitting cause for her son's breach in national security, the political climate of the Cold War in general (and not just the appeal of left-wing politics) is what ultimately destroys this home, fundamentally severing the bond between parents and child.

The narrative resolution, in turn, hinges on a further aspect of the uncanny. The son ultimately decides to do the "one decent thing" open to him and, having just been awarded an honorary degree of law, he uses the speech he is

scheduled to give to the graduating class to warn them about the dangerous lure of the Communist movement. Yet, because the actor, Robert Walker, had died during production, his character, John, had to be killed off as well. After making a tape recording of the self-accusation in which John calls himself a traitor, he dies in a car crash spearheaded by Soviet agents. In the final shot of the film, the dead son's recorded voice delivers his confession regarding his defiance of the values of his home from beyond the grave. The lectern on the darkened stage is empty, while a spotlight draws the attention of all those present at the commencement ceremony to the tape recorder transmitting this disembodied voice. The son, targeted by the F.B.I. as an internal enemy, turns into a martyr of the very cause that had entrapped him. He speaks with the authority that death lends any storyteller. Yet, against the manifest intention of the film's director, McCarey, a retrospective gaze can uncover a second, far more ambivalent meaning in the performance of this spectral doubling of the alien within. If John can make his confession only as a dead person, the effect is also a cinematic trick. On-screen, the man retracting his political views is simultaneously present and absent as a ghost of himself. The evidence is given in absentia, undermining the very containment it is meant to support because the body of the man speaking is missing.

Stephanie Coontz has argued that the notion of the nuclear family, providing physical shelter and emotional protection from the dangers of the outside world, was not only an invention of the 1950s. In fact, during this time, many Americans were far more aware of the violence or quiet misery beneath the polished facades of what was conceived as a mark of middle-class status than later retrospectives suggest.[7] With the postwar period fostering an upward mobility for men even while reintroducing domesticity for women, the American family may have been homeward bound but also bound to the home in such a containing manner to render this an ambiguous dream.[8] Decisive for my discussion is the fact that many Cold War melodramas themselves already belie this subsequent nostalgia for a safer, more intact past that actually never existed. In these films, the home as site where personal needs could be fulfilled in face of an outside threat, is rarely without internal fault lines, making it vulnerable to external threats even while placing pressures on family life from within.

The films I have chosen to explore this internal enmity all focus on a disruption of the three positions necessary to maintain this emotional bond: the fallibility of paternal authority, the challenge of maternal self-empowerment, and generational conflict. While *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1956) and *Autumn Leaves* (1956) focus on war memories rendering the home uncanny, *Half Angel* (1951) refutes the ideal of feminine domesticity which, in *The Desperate Hours* (1955) and *Something Wild* (1961), can only be regenerated through violence. While *The Bad Seed* (1956) revolves around a seemingly perfect child who, in fact, belies the role of obedient offspring, *The Bigamist*

(1953) and *The Swimmer* (1968) focus on the father who fails in his paternal role, engendering a complete break with what might be called home bondage. Thus, where, in *The Americans* and *My Son John*, those who render the home uncanny are explicit political subversives, these melodramas give shape to the concerns of Cold War culture by having recourse to the rhetoric of displacement. The threat to national security is re-encoded as a family affair. Forced to engage with internal frictions, rendering visible that something is wrong with the very bonds that hold the family together, at issue is the question whether the home can be recuperated? Can a couple, separated by discord, come together again? Can the family overcome its internal differences so as to face the outside enemy once more reunited? And what must be sacrificed for the family to become home bound once more?

Traces of War

A self-evident displacement for bringing the Cold War home is the veteran of an earlier war, unable to cast off his war memories. In *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, discontent in the home is explicitly linked by the mother, Betsy Rath, to the fact that, ever since the war, she feels her husband Tom has changed. During a conversation in their kitchen, she begins by ranting against the suburban house they are currently inhabiting, calling it "a graveyard of everything we used to talk about – happiness, fun, ambition – and I want to get out of it." To press her point, she adds that this house has not been a happy one ever since the war. Though Tom tells her to stop harping on a war which has been over for ten years and is thus gone and forgotten, she slyly retorts: "I don't believe it, not for you anyway." The flashback that soon follows reveals that he is, indeed, an uncanny double of the citizen soldier who enlisted, not only because of the destruction of human life which, in the name of the homeland, he was compelled to participate in. Maria, an Italian woman with whom he had a brief affair in Rome before shipping out to the Pacific, also inhabits this home as a spectral foreign body, producing a distance between him and his American family. Precisely because he has kept this other woman secret, Betsy has the canny sense that he is not sharing all of himself with her, perceiving him at times as an alien in their midst. Like McCarey's anxious mother, she, too, wants to find out what it is that has changed him, hoping to resurrect in him the spirited resolve he used to have.

Tom thus finds himself split between a past that continues to haunt him and a present, burdened by his wife's ambitions. While she wants him to have a job that will allow him once again to fight for something, his war past seems to have curtailed his willingness to take the risks necessary for the upward mobility to which she aspires. Even when his calm self-reliance lands him a promising job in the public relations office of a powerful philanthropist, he remains

divided against himself. Unable to assume the position of a stabilizing paternal authority, he inadvertently splits apart the home they share. Resolving this division involves bringing out into the open the secret he has sought to cover up. When the sergeant who was with him in Rome finally reveals that Maria had his child, an honest conversation with his wife proves to be the only way Tom can straighten out their home troubles. In their bedroom Betsy is finally able to extort the confession from her husband that will prove her suspicions correct.

In hindsight, this can be seen as an inversion of the HUAC hearings which, at the time, were hovering on the edges of all seeking after truth regarding past alliances. By sharing with her his wish publicly to acknowledge his son in Rome, enmity is transformed into a shared bond with the foreign woman who has been the source of their division. By asking from Betsy "some kind of understanding," Tom is proposing a definition of marriage that would be sustainable in the face of all external pressures in the future. She is to accept that his love for another woman was the response to the terror and hopelessness of an experience of war she, as someone who wasn't in a battle zone, can never really know. She is to trust – and therein lies the imaginary solution to the culture of paranoia this film reflects – a marriage that includes the open admission of infidelity and the responsibility for an illegitimate child. The fact that Betsy is the one who suggests setting up a trust fund for this boy enacts a different form of containment. If her discontent served to bring to light what was causing a disturbance of the home, her acceptance of her husband's fallibility not only allows the couple to be reunited. By engaging in an act of mercy she has come to accommodate the spectral rival disturbing her home, even while finding an articulation of her ambitions more conducive to her husband.

In *Autumn Leaves*, produced in the same year, the traumatized veteran brings war into a home that was not intact to begin with. The dark shadows on the walls of the apartment in Cedar Court where Milly Wetherby lives attest to a disturbance of her domestic life even before she meets Burt Hanson. While she was younger, her filial duties to her bedridden father had made marriage impossible, so that now, middle aged, she not only lives alone but has found it necessary to turn her apartment into her home office as well. Though, owing to the age difference, Milly is, from the start, cautious about this romance, she consents to marry the former army sergeant who showers her with gifts, only to discover that, like Nunally's hero, he is keeping secrets from her. He has only recently been divorced from a wife who, as figure of the repressed other, has returned for him to sign the settlement papers. His lying, regarding not only his true involvement on the Pacific war front but also false claims regarding his promotion at work, is, in turn, certifiably pathological. His bouts of memory loss make it impossible for him to remember what he has said and done. Unclear to the end, however, is whether his mental alienation is a form

of war neurosis and thus a reflection on the destruction of human life in the war that just ended in Korea. Or whether the intermittent amnesia attacks that leave him utterly incapacitated, are his psychic revolt against the fact that his first wife, who had betrayed him with his father, is now also seeking to dispossess him of his mother's estate.

Once Milly's suspicions about the truth of what he has been telling her have become aroused, her home turns into the site of a far more visceral domestic struggle than in *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, rendering visible the contradictions between the various displacements at issue. Is he lying to her in retaliation for the secrets kept from him by his first wife? Or is the violence he commits against her, smashing her hand with her typewriter, a symptom of the prejudice against single working women prevalent at the time? Has she brought this fracture of her home on to herself, as an expression of her own discontent with herself as the breadwinner in this marriage? Or is this attack in her home the emergency she requires to assert her agency belatedly against the demands of the ailing father of her youth? As in the other films discussed, her response – and in this she mirrors the 1950s culture of paranoia – is surveillance and interrogation. Milly forces Burt to confront his past although, significantly, the confession she is finally able to extort from him covers up his war trauma with family drama. The result is a nervous breakdown which reduces him to infantilism and forces her to have him committed to an institution that treats his schizophrenia with shock therapy; a different form of torture.

In *Autumn Leaves*, excessive influence of the self-reliant woman thus gives focus to the far less tangible anxieties revolving around political domestic enmity, even as, because this maternal love corresponds to Burt's neurotic need, it also proves to be its cure. When Milly goes to pick him up at the hospital, Burt is able to overcome her last remaining uncertainty with the candor of his newly rediscovered love. Taking her into his arms, he can return home with her. What was lurking beneath the surface of their union can now, having been addressed, once more be contained. Stanley Cavell argues that, in Hollywood cinema, the "covenant of marriage is a miniature of the covenant of the commonwealth." The reunion of a couple, separated because they had not yet understood the terms for the mutual acknowledgement that would allow them to share a "meet and happy conversation" with each other, can be taken as a trope for the successful recuperation of a trust in America as the community worth participating in.[9] As in Nunally's melodrama, the remarriage at the end of *Autumn Leaves* offers an imaginary solution to Cold War's culture with internal enmity that puts the onus on the restoration of individual happiness.

Feminine Domesticity Reloaded

Other films explore the uncanniness of home by bringing into focus how the cult of domesticity makes the heroine a hostage *in* and *of* the home. In *Half Angel* she proves to be an uncanny double of herself. Nurse Nora Gilpin, still living with her father, a dotty botanist, keeps putting off the engagement to the dull organization man, Tim, who is courting her. While, during the daytime, she corresponds to the stereotype of the demure and restrained 1950s bride-to-be, there is a psychic conflict hidden within her, involving her childhood sweetheart, the lawyer John Raymond, who seems to have forgotten all about her. At night, her hope that she might jog his memory, brings out that other side of herself she is unable fully to repress. In contrast to *Autumn Leaves*, this struggle within herself does not take the form of schizophrenia but simply that of the love-sick sleepwalker who forgets during the day what she does at night. Yet the unfinished business Nora attends to at night is as personal as it is collective. The woman who will allow nothing to get in the way of her pursuit of the man she wants recalls the empowerment of women on the home front during World War II. This claim to self-determination is what the 1950s working woman, waiting to become home bound by marriage, was meant to deny herself. What produces domestic disturbance in *Half Angel* is thus the return of two phantoms of the past: the adolescent Nora, as yet unrestrained in pursuing her romantic dream, as well as the heroine of the sophisticated comedies of the 1930s and '40s, resilient and resourceful in articulating her desire. Nora's first scene of transformation underscores how an assertive sexual drive, lurking beneath the surface of 1950s docility, successfully breaks through. Having chosen a green silk dress as her instrument of seduction, the somnambulist undoes the ribbon around the neck to produce a décolletage more typical of the fashion of the previous decade and uses it instead to accentuate her waist. With this uncanny appearance, which brings the past back into the present, Nora is able to make Raymond fall in love with her again.

The domestic struggle that ensues is based on the fact that the memory loss of her diurnal self is a desperate attempt to avoid facing the raucous fun her nocturnal doppelgänger has. At day she fights not against some past that is harmful to her (as is the case with the traumatized veteran) but rather against something which she, in pursuit of romantic happiness, cannot afford *not* know. In her effort to repudiate this insight, Nora turns her father's house into the scene of an enemy assault, culminating in the night before the wedding with Tim, which she hopes will contain her unruly unconscious desires once and for all. So as to protect herself both from herself as well as the lovelorn Raymond, keeping a close watch on her activities from his position on the other side of the street, she tries to barricade her bedroom. Yet the nocturnal Nora will not be contained and, escaping through the window, induces

Raymond to marry her immediately. The next morning, Nora, finding herself asleep next to her newlywed husband, runs away from the truth of her desire one last time. While her diurnal self still hopes to go through with the marriage to Tim (which would make her a bigamist), Raymond manages to interrupt the ceremony at the last minute. The fact that the moment Nora sees him she faints not only allows her repressed self to win the day but also attests to the resilience of this internal alien. When Nora finally acknowledges Raymond in public, she is in a state of trance from which, through the final moments of the film, she never wakes up. The tables have turn and it is now the diurnal self of repressed sexuality that has come to be contained. The vows that are renewed celebrate a wacky triumph of the return of the past which, as a deflection from the political realities of the early 1950s, can be taken as a quasi-nostalgic imaginary resolution for the time before the Cold War started.

While Wyler's *The Desperate Hours* also has recourse to the confidence of the World War II home front, it reintroduces this military past into the paranoia of Cold War culture in a far more explicit manner. Initially, nothing seems to trouble the home of Ellie Hilliard. Once her husband and her children have left her alone to do her morning chores, however, Glenn Griffin and two other men, who have just broken out of prison, force their way into her house, taking her hostage. If this criminal assault is conceived in terms of a military invasion, with drum taps accompanying their arrival, the result is strangely invigorating to the entire Hilliard family. One could read Glenn as the mother's symptom, rendering manifest what was hidden beneath the allegedly happy home she is mistress of; namely that her domesticity is, in fact, a trap. Yet it is also the case that, in so far as the presence of these bank robbers renders Ellie's housewife existence uncanny, this brings out her prior more resilient home-front self which, comparable to Nora in *Half-Angel*, she has been compelled to repress since World War II ended. When, at the end of the day, her family returns, they seem to be at the mercy of their aggressors, forced to comply with their orders. Indeed, as a form of class reversal, Ellie and her daughter are now the servants of men who have never lived in a middle-class house like theirs, cooking for them and attending to their needs. And yet, as though the family needed precisely such a state of emergency, they come together as a fighting unit in their effort to defend this home. Indeed, in that the gangster figure had come to serve as another self-evident example for the enemy within, Glenn's attack on the American home, which in war-effort films, such as *Since You Went Away*, was considered an unconquerable fortress, cannot only be seen as a continuation of war with other means. Rather, in that in this case the internal enemy is tangible, the house becomes the scene of battle where a very clear and unequivocal line can be drawn between friend and foe.

In this domestic war zone it is above all, however, the father who is revitalized, as he resiliently puts up resistance. Once he has managed to escape and

join up with the police, Dan C. Hilliard is finally able to cast off his current civilian role as a banker and become again what he once was, a war hero. Fighting this particular public enemy so as to restore peace to his home, he also stands in for an effort to eradicate those who threaten national security in general. By analogy, Glenn, the deviant, criminal citizen, is recast as an enemy of the state. When the police finally arrive, they surround the house, pointing their guns at all possible exits. Dan watches his house, now under attack from the inside as well as from the outside, through his neighbor's attic window. The wooden arches visually evoke the window in a bomber plane, rendering his house at the center as the chosen target of a military mission.[10] To underscore the fact that this is more than a city police affair, the FBI agent is the one who allows Dan to re-enter his home and use a ruse worthy of the best wartime strategy to force the last remaining criminal outside. Fully in line with the logic of the sacrificial victim, the execution of Glenn on the front lawn of the Hilliard home is not only justified. The violence rejuvenates the family as well. It is as though, along with the gangster, all that had implicitly been troubling this family has also been destroyed. As Dan, reunited with his family, re-enters a home seemingly cleansed of all danger, the lights in the house go on again. Only one detail mars this restoration. The telltale bicycle that had drawn the gangsters to this particular house in the first place, because it meant a nuclear family was living there, is still lying on the front yard. There could be another assault.

Figure 7.1 Attack on the Hilliard home in *The Desperate Hours* (1955).

Jack Garfein also gestures towards a militarization of domestic strife at the beginning of *Something Wild*. During the credit sequence, light bulbs on a billboard offer up the sentence fragment, "dimmed by military action," so as to gesture toward an unspecified sense of war hovering around the edges of this story about a rape victim. In contrast to the other films discussed so far, however, a concern with internal enmity is reshaped into a discussion of urban decay. Though Mary Ann does not confide in her mother after the assault, the awkward behavior of her daughter elicits from Mrs. Robinson the confession that, owing to the rise in crime, she no longer feels at home in their Brooklyn neighborhood. If the rape scene represents one form of domestic violence, it draws into focus another war zone as well, namely the world of those who have been pushed to the margins of 1950s middle-class upward mobility. Rather than displacing the political anxieties of Cold War culture onto the economically dispossessed, Garfein's film reverses the argument: an obsession with political enemies outside and within draws attention away from those who have been left behind in the war waged by capitalism against all those who are no longer profitable.

Estranged from her ordinary world, Mary Ann leaves her home and moves into a squalid room in a tenement building where she finds herself surrounded by vagabonds, sleeping on benches, literally homeless. Then, unable to regain her footing in a city that remains utterly threatening to her, she tries to jump off a bridge but is hindered by the car mechanic, Mike, who insists on taking her to his basement apartment. Offering her shelter and nourishment in his stark home, he also locks the door when he leaves so that she cannot escape. Having left a familiar neighborhood, which was no longer a site of protection and moved through the completely unfamiliar detritus of the lower East Side, Mary Ann thus lands in a home where she is the hostage of a stranger who is himself a splice between rescuer and assailant. As such, his home becomes the scene for working through the prior assault that had rendered her homeless, drawing out retaliatory violence in her as well. Their first night together, while protecting herself against Mike's drunken sexual advances, Mary Ann kicks out his left eye. Though she remains his hostage for several more days, she has proven herself no longer to being a passive victim and instead able to assert her resistance against his will to dominate her. Their domestic struggle is complicated, however, by the fact that to justify why he won't let her leave, despite her violence against him, he explains: "you are my last chance." The bars on the windows she looks out forlornly when she is alone underscore that this home is a prison, and yet, as the place she is trapped in because the man who has saved her can not afford to relinquish her, it also sets the scene for a spiritual redemption they can bring about only *for* and *with* each other.

Although, when Mike proposes marriage, she defiantly rebukes him, once she realizes that, upon leaving his home in hurt frustration, he has forgotten to

lock the door, necessity turns into choice. As she wanders through Manhattan, free again to go wherever she pleases, the city is no longer the scene of danger and destitution, serving instead as the backdrop for her rebirth. Her decision to return to him is one she makes for herself. In response to the uncertainty with which he greets her when she once more enters his home, she asserts: "I came back for you." The marriage these two people enter into at the end of *Something Wild* is an expression of radical hope, born out of a will to accept the fallibility of the other. When, many months later, Mary Ann writes to her mother, she is herself pregnant. In response to Mrs. Robinson's perplexity at hearing from her daughter only now, Mary Ann explains: "this is my home, this is my husband, this is where my life is." And while her mother initially won't understand, asking her repeatedly when she is coming home, the daughter uses this final struggle to assert her right to declare what she considers to be home for her. The rite of passage that began with her rape culminates in her achieving a state of adulthood which must include a mutual acknowledgement between daughter and mother. In the penultimate shot of the film, Mary Ann, locked into a tearful embrace with her mother, reaches for her husband's hand and smiles at him. In a lap dissolve, her radiant face then melds with the bridge she tried to jump from. The internal antagonism, on which this home is predicated, is contained and sustained by the sentimental bond forged between the three.

Figure 7.2 Mary Ann's bridge to tomorrow in *Something Wild* (1961).

Unruly Children, Failing Fathers

A different version of the momism of Cold War culture which, as Michael Rogin argues, "locates the problem in the very family that was suppose to provide the solution," can be found in *The Bad Seed*.[11] This film suggests that perhaps the most terrifying, undetected alien within might be the perfect child whose sweet appearance dupes those adults around her who want to be taken in because their trust in youthful innocence serves as an apotropaic charm against the threat the outside world poses. Rhoda Penmark, an adroit liar, for whom murder is the solution to all domestic conflicts, serves as a particularly vicious mirror for the fantasy of political subversives, living undetected in the midst of honest American citizens, because she uses flawless obedience to cover up her killer instinct. Here, too, the actual military conflict the United States was involved in is invoked obliquely and, as such, functions as the backdrop for the eruption of family violence in the home. Early on in the film, as the father, Colonel Kenneth Penmark, having been called off to Washington, D.C., takes leave of his family, the landlady, who lives upstairs from them, jokingly declares: "Do something about not having a war, will you, I'm not ready to be turned into a piece of chalk just yet." At the end of the film, in an act of quasi-divine retribution, the killer child, on to whom the threat of nuclear war has been displaced, will instead be struck down by lightning and incinerated.

External punishment is necessary because the mother, Christine, does not succeed in containing her daughter once she realizes that Rhoda not only killed the boy who was awarded the medal for penmanship she had hoped to receive but has also done away with the handyman Leroy because he has found the cleats-studded shoes she used as her murder weapon. The notion of an enemy within takes on a double meaning in *The Bad Seed*, however, in that Christine herself is haunted by nightmares that make her strange to herself. When she confronts her father with her suspicion that there is something uncanny about her daughter, Richard Bravo offers a confession she interprets as a conviction of herself. It proves her to be the unwitting source of the internal enmity that has erupted in her home. Her real mother, she discovers, was a serial killer who had abandoned her daughter on a farm while fleeing from the police. It was there that Richard Bravo found Christine while covering the story for a Chicago paper and, taken in with her sweet appearance, had adopted her on the spot. While the father staunchly refuses to believe that murder is a hereditary trait, Christine grows ever more suspicious that her daughter has inherited a complete lack of remorse or guilt from her. Like the mother in *My Son John*, she spies on her, searches her room, and interrogates her until she is finally able to extort a confession to a series of killings. *The Bad Seed* thus offers yet another interpretation of the Cold War fantasy that an internal enemy, if skilled at camouflage, cannot easily be discovered. Rhoda is able to perform the

role of virtuous child so convincingly precisely because she was born morally blind. The notion of the innocent child is thus debunked as a superb con game. Like McCarey's melodrama, this film, however, also poses the question: what kind of a family produces a bad seed that looks like a perfectly sweet little girl but can, if provoked, turn into an angry uncontrolled monster within seconds?

In contrast to Lucille Jefferson, Christine not only places the blame on herself for having mothered this alien child but also feels compelled to bear the responsibility for this fatal deed. The emotional quandary into which this places her leaves her facing a false choice. Should she protect her daughter at all cost? Or is she bound by the law to betray her (much as those before the House Committee on Un-American Activities were called upon to do)? The solution *The Bad Seed* comes up with is far more duplicitous than McCarey's melodrama. Embracing the idea that the disturbance which has disrupted her home since her husband went away, in fact, implicates both daughter and mother, Christine opts for a double sacrifice. She gives her daughter a lethal dosage of sleeping pills and then tries to shoot herself.

The fact that she doesn't succeed can be read as the film's discovery that there can be no neat solution of internal enmity.[12] Rhoda is finally killed off when lightning strikes the boathouse she has gone to at night. She had wanted to retrieve the medal her mother hid there so as to dispose of all evidence linking her daughter to the murder of the little boy. Christine, in turn, wakes up from her coma but is prevented from making her confession. Although, when her husband telephones the hospital, she wants to tell him everything, he insists – as yet another oblique reference to the clandestinity fostered by Cold War culture – that they must not talk about it now. The close-up of her silenced face suggests that, like the nightmare images of her mother, this forbidden knowledge will come to haunt the home she, upon her convalescence, will be bound to again. Yet a further ambivalence mars the reunion of this couple over the dead body of their killer child. Her father was not the only one to insist that the cause for a child proving to be a moral bad seed must be environmental not hereditary. If, then, Rhoda's evil is a response to the Cold War milieu she grew up in, her killing reflects a political culture that produces the very aliens it seeks to eradicate. As a symptom of this logic, Rhoda may have disappeared but the problem she gave shape to remains unresolved.

While, in the *Bad Seed*, the father remains oblivious to the alien force that has rendered his home uncanny, and with this blindness displays, albeit unwittingly, his own fallibility as figure of authority, *The Bigamist* revolves around a man whose failure as a husband ends in a court case that puts him on trial. And, while in *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, the father is spiritually torn between his suburban American home and the wartime lover he left behind in Rome, Harry/Harrison Graham literally lives in two homes – the elegant apartment he shares with his official wife, Eve Graham in San Francisco, and

the house he inhabits with his clandestine wife, Phyllis Martin (along with his illegitimate son) in Los Angeles. This double life renders both homes uncanny, even as it destabilizes his paternal authority. Each home is haunted by his life with the other woman about whom neither wife knows anything. Indeed, analogous to the undercover agent, this traveling salesman is strained by the deception he must sustain so as to prevent each of his wives from even suspecting the existence of the other. Ironically, his bigamy comes out into the open because he and Eve have decided to adopt a child. The man from the agency in charge of their case, Mr. Jordan, proceeds with an investigation that, too, is shaped by Cold War concerns. Though on the surface, the Grahams seem to be the perfect couple for adopting a child, Mr. Jordan feels compelled to check everything. While sitting in the kitchen with Harry, he addresses the fact that he spends much time in Los Angeles on business and asks for "the names of some of the people down there with whom you work." Deviously he pulls a small black notebook out of his left jacket pocket and then proceeds to explain, "it is all routine nothing more than that."

The concern on Harry's face, in turn, further invokes memories of similar tactics on the part of the FBI agents working in the name of HUAC. Indeed, as Mr. Jordan goes down to Los Angeles in an effort to gather more information, his surveillance becomes increasingly more sinister. The camera repeatedly focuses on the piercing gaze he casts on the world, constantly in search of one clue that will confirm the suspicion driving his inquiry. Following up on the names he has been given, he seems almost disappointed when the assessment of his suspect is favorable. Then again he gets positively excited at any information the people at the office out of which Harry works supply that suggests something may be wrong after all about the man he is investigating. His suspicion pays off when he finds a paperknife on Harry's desk bearing the name Harrison Graham, under which he is also listed in the Los Angeles telephone book. The confession Jordan extorts from him once he has found him living in this other home does not produce the understanding Harry had hoped for. Nevertheless, Jordan doesn't call the police, explaining that, although he both despises and pities him, he almost wishes him luck. Instead, Harry is arrested shortly after having returned to his home in San Francisco, with Eve, standing on the balcony of her apartment, tearfully watching him being taken away by two men.

By turning himself in, Harry destroys both marriages. The peculiar irony of the case, as the judge notes during his trial, is that his crime consisted in doing the right thing by marrying Phyllis when he discovered she was pregnant, even if this very act also meant a betrayal of both women he claims to love. The fact that the judge goes on to explain that bigamy strikes at the root of American society, can be read as a final reference to the domestic struggle sustaining Cold War culture. If the covenant of marriage is a miniature of the covenant of the

nation, a man united with two women represents a breach in the allegiance to only one flag that American patriotism demands. The judge's closing statement addresses the quandary now facing this basically decent salesman in terms of a forfeiture of home. Conceding that he may well have loved both women, the judge adds: "I also suspect that he may now have lost them both." Having been found out publicly, the issue isn't which woman he chooses to go back to but rather which one might take him back. While it is clear that the decision is theirs, the film leaves open which choice they will make. Phyllis is the first to rise from her seat and leave once the court is adjourned. Eve, in turn, hesitates on the threshold and turns back to look at her husband. As Harry is led away, she remains there, leaning on the doorframe. A successful recuperation of her home, like the reunion of nation in the face of the split allegiance in its midst, remains suspended; a possibility that might, or might not, still be achievable.

If *The Bigamist* ends with a hero, uncertain which home, if any, he may be returning to, *The Swimmer* focuses on a father who has already lost his home but refuses to acknowledge this fact. One late summer morning, Ned Merrill suddenly appears at a friend's pool and, looking out across the valley, comes up with a project to sustain the dream he has regarding his own prowess. He notices that there is a string of pools that go clear across the county all the way to the recreation center pool where, just a bit further up the hill, his house stands. As a tribute to his wife, he wants to call the river these pools form the Lucinda River. The mantra sustaining him throughout the day is the claim: "I can swim home." What initially looks like a playful take on the Emersonian notion of self-reliance becomes progressively more somber. With each new neighbor he meets, it becomes ever more clear that Ned is in a state of denial, holding on to a dream of home to which no reality corresponds. Indeed, his swim from pool to pool is meant to cover up the fact that, owing to the failure of his business, he has been forced to give up this residence. He has become a stranger to some of his former friends, a *persona non grata* to others, in debt with shopkeepers and his daughters' object of ridicule. The limp and the shiver he develops as the day progresses serve as a bodily symptom of this fallibility, even while his resistance against this impairment signifies the force of his dream. That his story, like the others discussed in this chapter, serves as a trope for the state of the nation is invoked when his former lover, Shirley, mockingly reminds him of how troubled his family life had been while they were having their affair, calls the place she could never come visit his "house on a hill."

The more he holds on to images of past happiness, the more the people who confront him contradict this nostalgia. As such, he emerges as the foreign body among them, rendering visible a fissure in the collective dream regarding the sustainability of prosperity and security holding together this county in Connecticut. He represents internal enmity in part because he has failed or disappointed some of the members of this community, in part because, owing

to his refusal to accept the truth of his failure, he uses violence against those who rebuke him or tell him facts about his family life that contradict the vaulted ideal of home he is clinging to at all cost. He also puts on display a crisis in paternal authority in that, because he is dressed in nothing more than his swimsuit, his vulnerable bare body is a warning to others that their situation, too, could be precarious. The fact that his real estate is in his wife's name, even while she was also the one to sell off their possessions, draws into focus the role gender plays in his domestic struggle. Lucinda and her daughters, we are led to understand, have no illusions about their changed prospects. Indeed, the coverup Ned performs, as he staunchly holds on to the need to swim home, is, above all, a form of self-dupery. The uncanniness he introduces into each of the homes he visits emerges from the fact that he is a double of himself. The image of the successful business man and loving father, to which he clings, is a spectral self hovering over the reality of his ruin.

When he finally reaches his home it has not only begun to rain. The house has also clearly been abandoned. The gate is rusty, the driveway overgrown, the tennis court in disrepair. Yet, even in the face of this manifest evidence of failure, Ned remains the resilient American hero who will not relinquish his memories of past happiness regardless of his current situation. As he walks up to his front door, the steps covered with broken branches, he hears the spectral laughter of his daughters playing tennis. Finding the front door locked, he persists in trying to force his way in until he realizes that he is irrevocably shut out from the very home on which his blind optimism was predicated. Forced finally to acknowledge what he can not afford not to know, he remains caught on the threshold in a huddled position, weeping helplessly, sheltered only by the wall framing the door. If the attraction of Ned's dream of home remains to the end on the level of a wish, this no longer serves an anticipation of what might yet be achieved, personally and collectively. Rather, in the year of the Tet Offensive, when the American public, forced to recognize the resilience and capabilities of the North Vietnamese, began to launch their own opposition to this war on the home front, *The Swimmer* proposes a dream of home revolving around the ruin of this vaunted ideal. The paternal position is not restored, as in *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* or *Autumn Leaves*, nor is the couple reunited as in *The Desperate Hours* or *The Bad Seed*. No remarriage is achieved as in *Half-Angel* to provide consolation regarding the couple formation as miniature standing in for the nation. Instead, the final shot of the film arrests the fallible father in a freeze frame, utterly alone in his arrogant individualism, reduced to his bare life, melding him into the image of detritus that is his home.

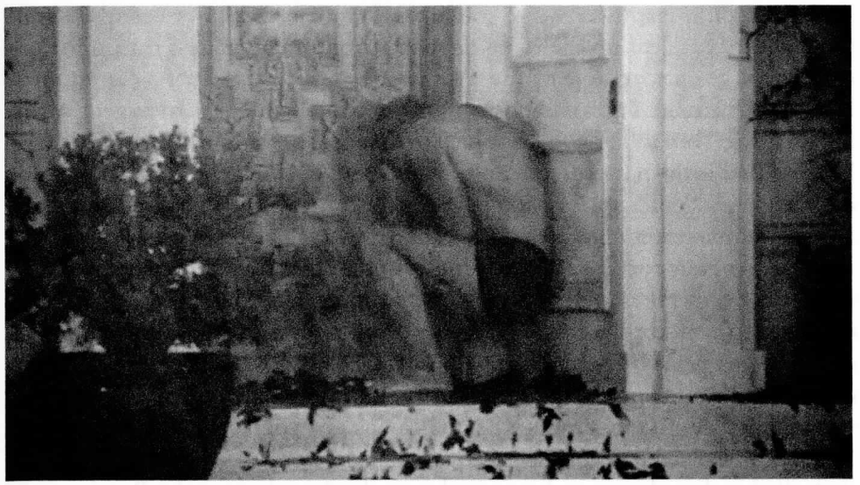

Figure 7.3 Ned arrested in the frame of his home ruin in *The Swimmer* (1968).

Coda

At one moment in the romantic comedy, *That Funny Feeling*, Tom Milford, a successful publisher, rushes into a phone booth on 62nd Street, just across from his apartment. An elderly woman is already standing there, hoping to enter it herself. Gently but firmly he takes the dime she has just extracted from her purse to make her own call and uses it himself. Several passersby gather around the enraged woman who begins embellishing her tale by turning it into a story of violent assault. Then one of them explains: "It's the Russians. They're sprinkling something around, makes everybody crazy." This is both the logical conclusion and, at the same time, a playful inversion of all the strategies of displacement discussed in this essay. A Russian attempt at interfering with the everyday life in Manhattan serves as a catchall explanation for whatever disturbances may be occurring. For the comic turn of events, this intangible, ubiquitous political threat thus serves as a cover for the concrete takeover of the hero's home by Joan Howell, a striving actress who cleans his apartment when he is away. Displacing the threat of a nuclear confrontation between the two superpowers into a love story, *That Funny Feeling* revolves around the collisions between these two people as they, at first, literally keep crashing into each other and then embark on a love affair that culminates in a battle of wits. The cause for this struggle is the fact that the apartment Joan shares with a roommate is too small for her to entertain Tom. She thus decides to usurp the home of the client she has never met, calling it her own, even while unaware that Tom is, in fact, that very man.

If, thus, on a latent level, the confusion Joan causes allows her to be read as a subversive agent on the romantic home front, the manifest reason for her agitation is of an economic nature. At the same time, her lack of a comfortable home does turn her into an imposter comparable to an undercover agent when, upon taking Tom to the home she has occupied, she claims to be Joan Milford because that is the name on the door. The irony, of course, is that, she has not only rendered Tom homeless, compelled to seek shelter with a friend. By assuming his last name and moving into his apartment, she also anticipates what the conclusion of any romantic comedy must be: the achievement of marriage. If, in turn, it not only takes mutual deception and surveillance but even a police raid on the apartment for the couple to finally come together, this debunks the myth of home as a place of comfort and security. The proposal scene, on which this couple's future happiness is predicated, significantly takes place in the police van taking them to the station. Their collisions and conflicts may have successfully been resolved but, through the end, they are not home bound. To suggest that all this disturbance at home is the result of something the Russians are sprinkling around is telling. When an external political threat can be normalized into domestic wackiness, it loses all touch of paranoia. That, too, is an imaginary resolution to actual conflicts but one that leaves the future once more open.

Notes

1. Michael Wood, *America in the Movies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975), p. 42.
2. See Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (New York: Random House 1952), p. 3–41.
3. Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny" (1919), *The Standard Edition 17* (London: Hogarth Press 1955), p. 220.
4. See Alan Nadel. *Containment Culture. American Narratives, Postmodernism, and the Atomic Age* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press 1995), p. 20.
5. J. Hoberman, *An Army of Phantoms: American Movies and the Making of the Cold War* (New York: The New Press 2011) notes that while John's terminal irony signals that he has clearly gone wrong, the question that above all the film addresses is "what sort of American family produces an Alger Hiss?" p. 193.
6. Michael Rogin, "Kiss me Deadly: Communism, Motherhood, and Cold War Movies, " *Ronald Reagan: The Movie* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1987) p. 252.
7. See Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were. American Families and the Nostalgia Trip* (New York: Basic Books 1992).
8. As Elaine Tyler May argues in *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books 1988), the ideology of domestic containment and Cold War militancy rose and fell together. If, initially the turn to the home was the response to the threat of nuclear war, by the mid-1960s Cold War tensions had given way to culture wars, with the baby-boom generation reconsidering the cult of domesticity.
9. Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness. The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1981), p. 151.

10. *The Desperate Hours* plays with genre memory concerning the World War II war film, not least because of the star, Frederic March, who had already played a banker, returning from a bomber unit in William Wyler's *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946). For a discussion of the crime film as a continuation of war with other means, see also Elisabeth Bronfen, *Specters of War: Hollywood's Engagement with Military Conflict* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press 2012); pp. 196–213.
11. Rogin, ibid., p. 252.
12. While in the novel by William March, the mother does die, leaving Rhoda undiscovered and now also unhindered in her freedom to kill, the film had to reverse this solution in compliance with the Hays Production Code.

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